

A Better Ending

Dr. Stephen McConnell

 *John 1:19-34*

In the penultimate chapter of Charles Dickens' *A Christmas Carol* – having been visited by Marley's Ghost and the Spirits of Christmas Past and Present – Scrooge has been taken to the future by the last of the Spirits and shown how life will be should he retain his miserly course – he sees the demise of Tiny Tim and then is taken to an old cemetery and shown a lonely grave.

Dickens writes:

Scrooge crept towards it, trembling as he went; and following the finger, read upon the stone of the neglected grave his own name, Ebenezer Scrooge.

'Am I that man who lay upon the bed,' he cried, upon his knees.

The finger pointed from the grave to him, and back again.

'No, Spirit. Oh no, no.'

The finger still was there.

'Good Spirit,' he pursued, as down upon the ground he fell before it: 'Your nature intercedes for me, and pities me. Assure me that I yet may change these shadows you have shown me, by an altered life.'

The kind hand trembled.

'I will honour Christmas in my heart, and try to keep it all the year. I will live in the Past, the Present, and the Future. The Spirits of all Three shall strive within me. I will not shut out the lessons that they teach. Oh, tell me I may sponge away the writing on this stone.'

In his agony, he caught the spectral hand. It sought to free itself, but he was strong in his entreaty, and detained it. The Spirit, stronger yet, repulsed him.

Holding up his hands in a last prayer to have his fate aye reversed, he saw an alteration in the Phantom's hood and dress. It shrunk, collapsed, and dwindled down into a bedpost.

End of chapter.

What will the ending be? We might wonder that to ourselves if we had been the first to read the story back in 1843. What will happen to this selfish old man? Will he shut out the lessons the Spirits teach? Or will he change these shadows with an altered life?

Imagine turning the page and reading that Scrooge woke up from his troubled sleep and realizing that it was just a dream – got up, got dressed and went to work. No Christmas turkey. No feast at the nephew's house. No forgiveness of debts. No increase in Bob Cratchit's salary. No being a second father to Tiny Tim. None of it. Just back to the way things have always been. Just another day of doing the same thing. Imagine such an ending. Why, it just wouldn't be *A Christmas Carol*. There just really would not have been a point to the story.

There may be no better day than December 31, New Year's Eve, as we look back with the Spirit of the Past, and look at the moment with the Spirit of the Present, and look ahead with the Spirit of the Future – to wonder about the point of the story. Certainly the story of our lives – but also in particular the story we've just been reading. The story about the young mother with child, and the angels and the shepherds and the wise men. The story about Nazareth and Bethlehem. The story about the Word becoming flesh and dwelling among us. We've reached the end of the penultimate chapter – the heavens have opened and the Christ child has been born – and now it is time to turn the page – now it's time to see what's next, what's going to happen -- and with the page

turn – the spotlight shifts to you and to me – and the readers are wondering what will happen to these people? What will happen when they wake the next day, the next week, the next year? Will things be different? Lives be altered? A new course set? What will be the point of this story?

And so almost on cue – onto the stage walks John the Baptist. Just when we were just about ready to get back to the way things have always been, just when we got thinking about January 2 and putting Christmas away and hunkering down for 2018 – onto the stage walks this wild and crazy figure named John – dressed up in some crazy looking outfit – Mark tells us that he was dressed in camel's hair and wore a leather belt and ate locusts and wild honey. Enough to grab our attention. John walks into the tail end of our Christmas party while we're sipping our last egg nog – and asking for our coats and he stands at the door of the New Year and says, "Hold your horses. No one's going anywhere. No one is leaving this place, no one is finishing this story, no one is moving into the New Year, until you hear from me."

Now this is the part of the story where we get confused. We thought that this Christmas was supposed to be like all the other Christmases. Do our annual thing. "How was Christmas this year?" our friends will ask, and we'll say, "Just fine. Just

fine." That's the way it's supposed to go and we make our way to the door and brace ourselves for the uncertainty of a New Year – and then almost like the Spirit of the Time to Come – John the Baptist appears and he says to us, "You know it doesn't have to be the same. It doesn't have to be the same old thing. It doesn't have to be the same old you. Things can change. You can change. Life can change. Repent."

Christopher Vogler in his great book on writing talks about how to write a compelling story – and he goes back to the great ancient mythologies, the great stories of civilization – and he says there is a certain structure where the hero of the story has to pass through a series of phases in order to become truly a transformative character – and one of the phases is confronting what he calls the "Threshold Guardian". And the Threshold Guardian is the character in every great story who stands between the past and future and challenges the hero. And unless the hero engages the Threshold Guardian – then there is no way he or she becomes a hero – and, in turn, there is no real point to the story.

So it makes all the sense in the world as we make our way from Bethlehem and into the New Year – we find at the threshold this rather threatening character John. And he says, "Repent. Change course. Don't remain on the same road. If you want there to be a point to this story, if you want there

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to be a point to your story – things have to change. You are here on this earth for bigger things. You are in this story for a better ending.”

So the New Year is this great time when we give ourselves maybe the smallest of chances to wonder – could my story have a better ending? Today and tomorrow is that time of great hope and intention when we wonder how might things be different for me in the future, what new course might I set, what new mission might I pursue? And there would be nothing better for us to do today and tomorrow than to engage the Threshold Guardian – and let the Baptist challenge us into a change.

But you know the Baptist doesn't just show up at the end of December. That's usually how we treat him – kind of like one of those Christmas figurines we take out at the end of the year and then put back in the box for the next 11 months – but I think we're missing the whole point. Because I think the Baptist shows up not just at the threshold of the year – the Baptist shows up in the thresholds of life. Because if there is anything that life has – it has its thresholds. And I think you know what I mean. I mean those events that happen in life that give you pause. They can be good events, they can be bad events. They can be unexpected events. They can be life-shattering events or they can be events of great fortune. But life has these threshold events that give us pause. It can be the birth of your child, it can be the divorce of your marriage. It can be the loss of your job, or it can be the illness of your child. It can be your move to a new city or a life-threatening diagnosis. It can be your last kid leaving the house or it can be the start of retirement. It can be the death of your spouse or a new found love. Life has these threshold events that give us pause and make us wonder what in heaven's name is going to be next? And that is precisely what John steps onto the stage to do – to say his line, “What in heaven's name is going to be next? Because it doesn't have to be the same thing. It not supposed to be the same thing. You were made for bigger things. You are in this story for a better ending. If

there is anything that this baby born in Bethlehem is about – it's about the power of God to change history. And that includes your history.”

Some of you have read the novel or seen the movie *The Shack*, the harrowing fictional story of a father, Mack Phillips, whose daughter is kidnapped and brutally murdered – found in a remote shack in the woods. A threshold moment which should be visited upon no parent. But a threshold it was nonetheless – and so as the story goes Mack faces into the threshold and visits “the shack” and there is visited by the three persons of the Trinity and in this visitation becomes a different person. What most don't know about the story is that it was written by Paul Young who wrote it as an allegory to his own life, his own threshold experience. His threshold was having his wife, and mother to his five children, catching him in an affair with his wife's best friend. This while being a pastor. Talk about threshold, talk about the world collapsing around you. Talk about an uncertain future. But confronting his own brokenness, his own failure, his own family dysfunction, his own shame – Paul heard the voice of the Baptist – “Repent, change, choose a new course.” And with the grace of his wife and family and a whole lot of therapy, he found a new path, a different course. He was made for bigger things. His story had a better ending. And from his own story came the story of *The Shack*.

So it makes me think of a friend of mine. I'll call him Bill. And I got to meet Bill a long time ago at the threshold. When Bill was a kid he started drinking pretty early and liked being the life of the party. But he soon went from being the life of the party to being the embarrassment of the party. And his friends told him as much. But that didn't stop him. He just kept on going. And when his boss told him he better lay off the sauce that didn't stop him. He just kept on going. And when his boss told him he didn't have a job anymore that didn't stop him. He just found another job and kept on going. And he later reported to me, that this was the time when he started bargaining with God that if God

would let him live to the age of 30 he would be happy. He couldn't ask for anything more than that. 30. But then at age 27 his girlfriend announced to him that she was pregnant and that she was going to bring their child into the world and that he had some decisions to make. Was he going to be a man? Was he going to be a husband? A father? And that's when the Baptist showed up. You were made for bigger things, Bill. You are in this story for a better ending. And so came the daily meetings with new friends at Alcoholics Anonymous. So came regular visits to the neighborhood pastor. So came a change of career. So came a commitment to be a husband and father. I got his Christmas card the other day as I do every year. It's been thirty years. It hasn't been perfect. But there he is standing in his living room with his bride of thirty years, his four children, a mother-in-law, a son-in-law, a daughter-in-law, three grandchildren, a dog. Wow – what a different ending.

Who knows what 2018 is going to hold? Some good things, some bad things. Certainly some thresholds. Moments of pause. Maybe today is one of them. Maybe it's not. But they will come – that's to be sure. And there we'll find the Baptist. The Spirit of Things to Come. Repent, he'll say. Time to change. Bigger things await. A better ending is in store.

“(So Scrooge)”, Dickens writes, “became as good a friend, as good a master, and as good a man as the good old City knew, or any other good old city, town, or borough in the good old world ... and it was always said of him, that he knew how to keep Christmas well...”



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